

## Difficulties in Learning and Producing Passive Voice

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### **Abstract**

This study examines how learners learning English produce and judge English passive voice structures. The ultimate goal of this study is to contribute to an understanding of the extent, nature and sources of learners' persistent difficulties with some syntactic properties of the language they are acquiring.

It is to examine whether word order errors in the production of English passive voice by L2 learners stem from lack of knowledge or from difficulties with automatic implementation of L2 procedures.

To examine whether errors in the production of English passive voice by L2 learners (in our case, English) can be attributed to transfer of L1 (in our case, Albanian) properties and vice versa, Albanian and English patterns are compared.

Taken together, the facts indicate that difficulties with English passive voice structures are a consistent phenomenon in L2 acquisition, and do not follow in a direct way from properties of the L1. Furthermore, the facts show that learners' errors are associated with some syntactic configurations, suggesting that L2 learners divert similar grammatical hypotheses and make use of similar mechanisms for language acquisition.

**Keywords:** *transfer, compare, similarities, interference*

### **Introduction**

The English passive is an English language structure that is used in many reading passages, particularly in academic and scientific texts, when it is not necessary to be mentioned the responsibility of the doer. Therefore, it is obvious that English passive is included in English instruction in most education levels. During my teaching experiences, I have found that a large number of Albanian EFL learners, at university level, cannot use the English passive correctly, although they have been taught this structure since secondary schools. Thus, English Grammar and Albanian Grammar were presented in order to explain the structure of passive voice. In order to describe the students' errors, a special case of Contrastive Analysis is

used, and synonymous utterances are compared in the learner's target language; in the other words, "erroneous utterances" and "reconstructed utterances" were compared. Furthermore, the Contrastive Analysis was also used to find out the similarity and the difference between English and Albanian passive voice.

### **Scope of Problem**

The study attempted to examine the following problems:

1. What is the similarity and difference between English and Albanian passive voice?
2. What are the difficulties faced by the students in producing English passive voice?

### **Concept of English Passive Voice**

The passive voice is used as a strategy that allows language users to avoid mentioning the agent", and in majority of cases, the subject of the active verb – the agent - is not expressed in the passive. For example, the sentence "*The window was broken by the boy*" is called a passive voice because the subject "*The window*" receives the action of the verb "*broken*". According to Quirk *et. al* (1985: 58); In all passive clause types, the agent *by*-phrase, which incorporates a noun phrase equivalent to the subject of the corresponding active clause, has the structural status of an optional adverbial. Even when the agent *by*-phrase is absent, however, there is an implication of its presence at the level of meaning. In this sense, the agent *by*-phrase acts as complementation of the passive verb.

### **English Grammar**

According to Quirk (1985: 37-47), "Grammar is a complex system, the parts of which cannot be properly explained in abstraction from the whole. In this sense, all parts of grammar are mutually defining, and there is no simple linear path we can take in explaining one part in terms of another". One of the important aspects in the process of learning the second language is the mastery of grammar. Particularly, in this study, the students have to learn when to use regular and irregular verbs, tenses, and „to be“ in forming the English passive voice.

## English Verb

The verb indicates an action, an occurrence, or a state of being. Eckersley (1960: 143) said that, though to have a sentence without a verb is possible, it is true that, in the great majority of sentences, the verb is the word that plays the most important part. Whether mental, physical, or mechanical, verbs always express activity.

## Forms of the Verb

Here are the forms of the verb that no sentence structure, and particularly passive voice structure, could be formed without them:

- a. Finite or Non-Finite Verbs
- b. Regular and Irregular Verbs
- c. Transitive and Intransitive Verbs

## Verb Voice

According to Eckersley (1960: 219-224), "If the person or thing denoted by the subject of a sentence is the doer of the action, then that form of the verb is the active voice.

*e.g. The man kicked the ball. (Active Voice)*

If the person or thing denoted by the subject of a sentence is the receiver or sufferer of the action, then that form of the verb is the Passive Voice, *e.g.*

*The ball was kicked by the man. (Passive Voice)*

The passive voice is formed using the appropriate tense of the verb *to be* + *the past participle* of the verb.

In many cases, when the active construction is changed into the passive, it is better to omit the agent. For example, when the following sentence is in the active voice:

*People in Kosovo speak Albanian.*

The passive voice sentence should be:

*Albanian is spoken in Kosovo. And NOT: Albanian is spoken in Kosovo by people.*

Only the *transitive verbs* can be used in passive voice. The verbs of Incomplete Predication such as *seem*, *be*, *become*, etc., can never be used in passive; *e.g. He became King* could never have a passive form such as *A king was become by him*. Certain intransitive verbs can be made into

transitive ones by the addition of a preposition. These verbs can be used in the passive voice, e.g.

*His plan was laughed at by everyone who heard it.*

*That is a famous bed; it was slept in by Queen Elizabeth I.*

Though all transitive verbs can theoretically be made passive, there are cases where, in practice, the passive would not be used, for example:

*He had a good breakfast before he went to work,* would not be used passively as: *A good breakfast was had by him....*

Some verbs, such as *give, tell, show, lend, get, write, sell, buy, bring, make, fetch, promise, teach*, take two objects, one usually standing for a person, the other for a thing. The word for the person is **INDIRECT OBJECT** and is the first of the two objects; the word for the thing is **DIRECT OBJECT**, e.g. He sold us (indirect) his house (direct). Here, *us* means „to us“.

### **The infinitive without to**

In the active voice some verbs are followed by the infinitive without *to*. In the passive we use most such verbs with the infinitive with *to*.

Active: *We saw them come. She made him do it.*

Passive: *They were seen to come. He was made to do it.*

### **Infinitive constructions after passive verbs**

Sentences of the type, *People consider/ know/ think/estimate/feel/assume/claim*, etc. *that he is...* have two possible passive forms:

*It is considered/known/thought etc. that he is very intelligent.*

*He is considered/known/thought etc. to be very intelligent.*

*He is believed/known/said/supposed/thought to be living abroad.*  
(Continuous Infinitive)

### **Passive voice with gerund:**

e.g. *Having passed the test, he felt relieved.*

### **Modal Passives**

According to Azar, B. S. (1999: 218-233), Modal passives have the following structure:

*modal + be + past participle*

*This letter **ought to be sent** before June 1st.*

**Many stative passive verbs are followed by prepositions other than ‘by’.**

*I am interested in Chinese art.*

*He is satisfied with his job.*

**There are examples of idiomatic usage of the passive form in common, everyday English. These sentences have no equivalent active sentences.**

*I don't know where I am. I **am lost**.*

*I **am finished with** my work.*

*I can't find my purse. It **is gone**.*

*I **am done with** my work.*

### **The Passive with Get**

**Get** may also be followed by a past participle. The past participle functions as an adjective; it describes the subject.

*I stopped working because I **got tired**.*

### **Passive forms with Have and Get**

The passive form: have + subject + past participle is used to talk about something we want other people to do for us.

*She **had her nose pierced** when she was a teenager.*

Get + past participle is used for things that happen by accident.

*My luggage **got stolen** somewhere at the airport*

According to Coleman (1997): 'the passive form should be considered in each of the following cases, (A) *necessity*: to prevent ungrammatical, unwieldy or semantically confusing prose.

(B) *stylistic effectiveness*: to make the prose more coherent, elegant, economical and purposeful.

## **Albanian Grammar**

Besides the theory of English Grammar, it was also important to know the theory of Albanian Grammar, particularly the Albanian passive form, since the students' first language is Albanian language. According to Chomsky (1956) the languages share some features that are common in all, called as principles and some features that are different from one language to another language, called as parameters. It can be seen that the function, form and usage of the passive voice in Albanian language is the same as in the passive voice in English.

e.g. English: *The contract **was made** by him.*

Albanian: *Kontrata **qe lidhur** nga ai.*

Furthermore, they have the same rules for three forms of verbs like simple past or past participle.

e.g. English: do –did – done  
Albanian: bëj – bëra - bërë

Modal passive structure in Albanian is similar to that in English.

e.g. *Manuscripts should never be rolled and that they should be written on one side of the paper.*

*Dorëshkrimet s'duhet të palosen dhe duhet të shkruhen vetëm në njërën faqe të letrës.*

(Example taken from the novel, “Martin Eden” written by Jack London and translated by Shaban Demiraj)

They are similar with Stative passives,

e.g. *The door is locked.*

*Dera është e mbyllur.*

Both direct and indirect object take the position of subject in passive structures.

e.g. 1. *Someone gave Mrs. Lee an award* = *Dikush ia dha z. Lee një shpërblim*

*Mrs. Lee was given an award* = *Z. Lee iu dha një shpërblim*

2. *Someone gave an award to Mrs. Lee* = *Dikush ia dha një shpërblim z. Lee*

*An award was given to Mrs. Lee* = *Një shpërblim iu dha z. Lee*

According to *Wikepedia, Free Encyclopedia: 'English Passive'*, Albanian language has a middle voice. The middle voice often has a reflexive sense: the subject acts on or for itself, such as "The boy washes himself", or "The boy washes". It can be transitive or intransitive.

In English there is no longer a verb form for the middle voice, though some uses may be classified as a middle voice, often resolved via a reflexive pronoun, as in "Fred shaved", which may be expanded to "Fred shaved himself" – contrast with active "Fred shaved John" or passive "John was shaved by Fred".

Rista-Dema says that according to the literature on the structure of Albanian (Demiraj 1988; Kallulli 1995) Albanian is described as a free word order language. However, the unmarked order of constituents in a transitive construction is considered to be SVO, as in the following example:

Beni	shkruante	një	letër.
Ben-	the write	a	letter

(‘Ben was writing a letter’)

As Kallulli (1995) observes, “Albanian has full-fledged morphological case. Subjects (S) bear nominative case, direct objects (DO) bear accusative case, indirect objects (IO) bear dative case. Albanian is a null-subject language”. The verb contains information about the subject features. (P3ps = past 3rd person singular; Acc. = accusative.)

Lexonte                një libër

Read                    a book

P3ps                    Acc.

(‘He/she was reading a book’)

Subjects in Albanian may appear either preverbally or postverbally in both active and passive constructions, as well as in one-argument verb constructions. Kallulli notes: “The phenomenon of the subject appearing post-verbally is sometimes referred to as free inversion

... and is exemplified in the (b) examples.” Whereas English does not have this possibility, therefore it is obliged to use passive voice only.

Preverbal and postverbal subject constructions (Kallulli 1995: 6–7):

**1a.** Ana                këndoi                një këngë.                [S–V–O]  
An-the sing                a song  
Nom.                P3ps                Acc.                [Nom. = nominative]  
(‘Ann sang a song.’)

**b.** Një këngë                këndoi                Ana.                [O–V–S]  
a song                sang                An-the

**2a.** Shumë studentë                u arrestuan.                [S–Vpass]  
many students                were arrested                [pass = passe]

**b.** U arrestuan                shumë studentë.                [Vpass–S]  
were arrested                many students

A noun phrase is usually fronted (i.e. precedes the verb) when it is topicalized. Thus, when subjects are topicalized (since they are the best candidates for topics), they usually precede the verb. Just like subjects, dative objects are also good topic candidates in Albanian when they

constitute thematically prominent arguments. Focus, which is identified as the new element, occurs in clause-final position in Albanian. Kallulli (1995) refers to Massey (1991), who notes that “scrambling of objects to clause-initial position in Albanian is not equivalent to topicalization in English. As different from Albanian scrambling, topicalization of the object in English does not trigger subject–aux inversion, as shown below:

- a. John saw Mary.
- b. Mary John saw.
- a. Mary <sub>(DO)</sub> saw John <sub>(SU)</sub>.
- b. Mary did John see.

Therefore, it is obviously seen that English is to use only the passive construction in the sentences above, whereas Albanian can use either passive or active construction because Albanian can start the same sentences with the noun in accusative. Having this possibility, a large part of passive constructions in Albanian can be removed completely. And this is actually one of the key sources of difficulty that L2 learners face in producing passive voice structures in English, as being based on their L1 the students try to form the same construction in English, which is impossible. Consequently, they divert similar grammatical structures in L1 and make use of similar mechanisms for language acquisition.

## **Research Design**

This study used the quantitative and qualitative methods, since this study was intended to identify and analyze the students’ works to find the error made by them. Qualitative methodologies refer to the research procedures which produce descriptive data, while the quantitative method was used to identify the students’ work.

The participants in this study were drawn from learners registered for English Language, in the fifth semester of the academic year 2015.

The data source used in this research was the students’ works as the result of the test conducted after the lecturing process about the English passive voice. Then the students’ works were collected. The data in this study were analyzed to find out the problems of the students in forming the English passive voice.



## **Analysis and Discussion**

### **Contrastive Analysis between English and Albanian Passive Voice**

Although the test of the students in this study was to change active sentences in English into passive sentences and vice versa, yet the Contrastive Analysis is the basic thing in learning the second language. Therefore, it is considered necessary to analyze the differences and the similarities of passive structure between those two languages.

#### **Similarities:**

1. Both of them substitute the position of subject and object.
2. Choose the appropriate tenses based on the time signal and the singular or plural auxiliary verb.
3. Use Verb3 (past participle) in forming of the main verb in passive predicate verb phrase. If necessary add „by phrase“ after the main verb when it is important to know who performs the action or if the agent is not implied in the sentence.
4. Object in the active sentence becomes subject in passive sentence.
5. The „by phrase“ can be omitted if it is not essential to the meaning of the sentence.
6. Both English and Albanian passive need to use the transitive verb.
7. They are similar in modal passive structures.
8. Similar with Stative Passives.
9. When both direct and indirect object take the position of subject in passive structures.

#### **Differences:**

1. Passive voice is used more in English than in Albanian.
2. Albanian language has a middle voice.
3. Albanian is described as a free word order language.
4. Albanian has full-fledged morphological case; it has five cases respectively.
5. Subjects in Albanian may appear either preverbally or postverbally in both active and passive constructions. The subject appearing post-verbally is sometimes referred to as free inversion
6. Scrambling of objects to clause-initial position in Albanian is not equivalent to topicalization in English.

The similarities between English and Albanian passive voice gave the positive transfer to the students in learning the English passive voice. On the other hand, the differences between the English and Albanian passive were the negative transfer to the students. The prediction of the students'

errors in forming the English passive voice might come from those differences.

### Students' Errors

The students' works were classified in the form of three columns. Each column consists of the linguistic category, erroneous sentences, and the correct sentences.

Category of Errors	Erroneous Sentences	Correct Sentences
Incorrect use of past participle	1. The local jewelry was broked by someone yesterday. 2. The painting would be deliver.  3. Pictures must be include. 4. Is the article writed by Stanley?	1. The local jewelry was broken yesterday. 2. The painting will be delivered tomorrow. 3. Pictures must be included. 4. Was the article written by Stanley?
Malformation of active form	1. We are teaching grammar by Ms. Sullivan. 2. The injuring is taking to the hospital by the firemen. 3. Ms. Sullivan teached us grammar. 4. The town will destroyed by an earthquake. 5. By who were you teaching the French	1. Ms. Sullivan taught us grammar. 2. The firemen took the injured to the hospital. 3. Ms. Sullivan taught us grammar. 4. An earthquake destroyed the town. 5. Who taught you French?
Incorrect use of Simple Past in Passive Voice	1. Is telephone was invented by Mr. Bell. 2. Is this picture was painted by Peter.	1. Was the telephone invented by Mr. Bell? 2. Was this picture painted by Peter?
	1. Is thieves will be arrested by the police.	1. Will the thieves be arrested?

Incorrect use of Simple Future in Passive Voice	2. The best project about the environment will choose from the teachers. 3. A set of encyclopedias will give for the winner by the school. 4. Is the letters coming next week? 5. The teachers will chooset the best project.	2. The best project about the environment will be chosen by the teachers. 3. A set of encyclopedias will be given to the winner. 4. Will the letters be sent next week? 5.The best project will be chosen by the teachers.
Incorrect Passive Order	1.Was written by Stanley this article? 2. The truth he will tell them.	1. Was this article written by Stanley? 2.They will be told the truth.
Incorrect use of Present Continuous	1. A contest is organizing by our school.	1. A contest is being organized.
Incorrect use of Modal Verbs in Passive Voice	1. The drawings must include from the students in their project.	1. The drawings must be included in the project.
Passive Form used instead of Active Form	1. The town is being destroyed by an earthquake.	1. An earthquake destroyed the town.
Using Present Simple instead of Simple Future	1. Are the thieves arrested by the police?	1. Will the thieves be arrested?
Incorrect use of Present Simple in Passive Voice	1. Is animals are fed three times a day?	1. Are the animals fed three times a day?
Missing 'be'	1. This picture painted by my uncle.	1.This picture was painted by my uncle
Incorrect use of Present Perfect in Passive Voice	1. The lot of money has offered someone.	1. A lot of money has been offered.
Incorrect Passive Order,	1. I'm writte by Stanley.	1. Was the article written by Stanley?

Tense and P.Participle		
Active Form used instead of Passive Form	1.The school will given the winner a set of encyclopedias. 2. Our school has organized a contest. 3. Tomorrow he will deliver the painting.  4. Stanley wrote this article.	1. The winner will be given a set of encyclopedias. 2. A contest is being organized. 3. The painting will be delivered tomorrow. 4. Was the article written by Stanley?

The facts indicate that difficulties with English passive voice structures are a consistent phenomenon in L2 acquisition, and do not follow in a direct way from properties of the L1.

Out of 33 students, 4 of them made no errors and 3 made less or insignificant errors whereas the rest of them made the errors given in the table above.

Many students made word order errors in producing the passive form. It seemed that they were confused in forming the passive sentence from the active sentence, and such errors stemmed from difficulties with automatic implementation of L2 procedures.

Based on the above analysis, the category of errors ‘*Active form used instead of passive form*’, ‘*Incorrect use of Present Continuous*’ and the category ‘*Incorrect use of Simple Future in Passive Voice*’, reflect the interference of the students’ first language, respectively their predisposition in using active form.

Regarding other categories of errors, it seemed that the students did not understand the basic rule of English passive voice that is “be + past participle”. So, they either omitted ‘be’ or used verbs in present simple/infinitive instead of using past participle. Some verbs were written wrongly, such as, writte, writed, chooset, choos. Furthermore, the analysis show that learners’ errors are associated with some syntactic configurations, such as those in the category of ‘*Incorrect use of Simple Past in Passive Voice*’ and ‘*Incorrect use of Simple Future in Passive Voice*’, suggesting that L2 learners divert similar grammatical rules while trying to form a passive structure in English.

## Conclusion

The differences and similarities of both English and Albanian passive voice were found based on the grammar theory of those languages.

The similarities are: both of them substitute the position of subject and object; use past participle in forming of the main verb in passive predicate verb phrase. If necessary add „by phrase“ after the main verb when it is important to know who performs the action; object in the active sentence becomes subject in passive sentence; both English and Albanian passive need to use the transitive verb.

The differences are: passive voice is used more in English than in Albanian; Albanian language has a middle voice; different from English, Albanian is described as a free word order language; Albanian has full-fledged morphological case; it has five cases, whereas English has two; scrambling of objects to clause-initial position in Albanian is not equivalent to topicalization in English.

This study also attempted to find the source of the students' errors particularly in using the English passive voice. The data were taken from the students' test result, which was aimed to know the problems faced by the students in using the English passive voice. The linguistic error mostly made by the students was in the category of 'Active form used instead of passive form', 'Incorrect use of Present Continuous', 'Incorrect use of Simple Future in Passive Voice' and 'Malformation of active form'.

This study is expected to give a contribution in the area of teaching and learning especially in teaching English as a foreign language.

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